

Published: Aug. 16, 2015, Kokomo Tribune [Page: A4]

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Editorial: Restore the Voting Rights Act

Kokomo Tribune Editorial Board

On March 15, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson addressed Congress just a week after the clash between authorities and peaceful protesters on “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama, had scandalized the nation.

“Experience has clearly shown that the existing process of law cannot overcome systematic and ingenious discrimination. No law that we now have on the books ... can ensure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it,” he said. “The Constitution says that no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or his color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath.”

Introduced two days later and signed into law Aug. 6, 1965, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a landmark piece of legislation which stood as a lasting accomplishment of the civil rights movement for nearly half a century. Among other things, it eliminated artificial barriers to voting (including literacy tests and poll taxes) specifically designed to keep Southern blacks from casting ballots. That was, until 2013 when the 5-to-4 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Shelby County v. Holder* all but destroyed it.

In his majority opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts declared the coverage formula and requirement of states to receive approval from the federal government before changing voting laws “unconstitutional in light of current conditions.”

“Those extraordinary and unprecedented features have been reauthorized as if nothing has changed, and they have grown even stronger,” he wrote.

In the wake of this decision, a flurry of states (including Alabama, North Carolina and Arizona) previously covered by the VRA quickly changed their voting laws. Earlier this month, Texas’ voter ID law passed in 2011 and implemented after the *Shelby* decision was found by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals to violate the VRA.

“Texas was allowed to use the voter ID law during the 2014 elections, thereby requiring an estimated 13.6 million registered Texas voters to have a photo ID to cast a ballot,” reported The Associated Press Aug. 6.

On June 25, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, introduced a bill meant to patch the VRA.

“The legislation, titled ‘The Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2015,’ would force any state that has had 15 or more voting rights violations in the last 25 years to be subject to federal preclearance for any change in voting procedure or law,” reported Wesley Lowery of The Washington Post June 23.

With the 50th anniversary of this historic federal law being celebrated this month, we must push our legislators on this issue. Anything less is an insult to those fought for that most fundamental of American freedoms: the right to vote.